

Chechnya's Grim Sequel: David and Goliath Square Off in Round Two

The War in Chechnya by Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas; 1999; 359 pages; \$32.95 (hardcover).

I found myself paging back and forth through this book, about the first war in Chechnya, as I watched the second — and still ongoing — war in Chechnya on CNN. The book was written by Stasys Knezys, a retired colonel of the Soviet Union's Air Defense Forces, and Mr. Sedlickas, a former major in the U.S. Air Force, and it is an amazingly impartial analysis of what went on in Chechnya between October 1994 and November 1997. My reaction to the book, reading it while watching Chechnya War 2, was that the Federal Russian Army was using this book as a guide on what would work and what would not.

The book portrays a very ugly war. There is no standoff, precision-guided, clean combat detailed here; rather, it is a conflict more like World War II, our fathers' or grandfathers' war. I got a real feel for the conditions both sides faced. The authors very convincingly show us that the Russian Goliath was not as clumsy as we thought, and that the Chechen David was not nearly as noble as we thought.

The book develops a neo-Clausewitzian view of war in this postmodern age. The trinity of the state, the people, and the army is relevant, but is also supplemented by a new trinity of politics, the military, and terror. This is a very disturbing idea, but an accepted form of war used by the Chechens — terror as a means to an end. The end, which led to the hiatus in the war in 1997, justified the means of terror, which made the conditions for victory so costly that the Russians made terms. Politics clearly drove the objectives of the war. Terror, in Chechnya War 1, was judiciously applied, in the eyes of the Chechens. Terror in Chechnya War 2 appears to be overused and made the conditions for victory more palatable to the Russian government and people.

Information operations are analyzed. The Chechens capitalized on their perceived role of underdog, fighting a tough battle for freedom against a tottering imperialistic giant bent on retaining a vestige of empire. They used web sites, faxes, media access, and the brutal nature of the war as reinforcing fire against the Russians. The Russians never really had a chance in this supporting operation to the campaign. Clearly, in War 2, the Russians are doing a much better job. I visited a Russian web site on the war which portrayed the Chechens as criminals and terrorists. The series of bomb attacks in Moscow and other Russian cities certainly assisted this effort of making the enemy look like criminals.

Terror as a method of war, clearing population zones to prevent the enemy from using the people, war carried into cyberspace to sustain the morale of the home front and to demonize the enemy, all of this is unsettling to a conventional soldier raised in the Cold War. This book really made me think about future conflicts we may face as the little wars on the fringes of old empires boil over into regions that directly affect our vital national interests.

The final chapters, which detail lessons learned through analysis of both sides, are extremely disturbing. While slow to open, this book must be studied by serious students of war. Buy it, read it, think, and read it again. I was constantly reminded of what General Lee said at Fredericksburg: it is good that war is so terrible lest we grow too fond of it. This book describes a new type of warfare that we must learn how to deter, because if we fight it, we may have to become as savage as our enemies in order to set the conditions for our victory. And we will have to figure out how to justify to the world the means we employed to reach our ends.

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WEST WALL: The Battle For Hitler's Siegfried Line September 1944-March 1945 by Charles Whiting; Combined Publishing, Conshohocken, Pa.; 2000; 199 pages; \$27.95.

Charles Whiting has written the first in a series of nine volumes of WWII military history to be published by Combined Publishing between now and Autumn 2002. He implies that this may be the first look at what until now military historians have considered to have been little more than "...a series of separate engagements, only tenuously linked." His work describes the construction of, and battle over, the German Siegfried Line. Whiting informs the reader of his thesis early in the foreword: "...the battle ['The Battle for Hitler's Siegfried Line'] [was not only] the most important of the 1944-5 campaign against Germany, but ...it was the key battle of the entire war in the west." One could reasonably expect that, after a statement such as that, the author would provide documentation to back such a claim. That is, unfortunately, not the case. But if the reader understands this up front, then the book is a remarkably enjoyable read.

Whiting describes the West Wall (aka the "Siegfried Line") as the German equivalent to the French Maginot Line, but with fundamentally different results: "The battle [for the West

Wall] had prolonged World War II in the west by half a year, and the cost in Allied dead had been greater than the U.S. Army alone suffered in ten years of war in Korea and Vietnam." The elaborate defensive line incorporated the best of France's Maginot Line (a linear defense design with supporting fires) but avoided the weaknesses (single line of defense with zero air defense capability). It was a fortified defense-in-depth which was tied in with natural obstacles. These characteristics made it impossible to flank (thereby avoiding the Maginot Line outcome) and, most importantly, made it feasible to man with second- or third-rate troops, thus freeing crack troops for employment in other, more critical, areas.

The book strikes me as falling into an area of "military history" between dry reference material and historical novel (the author manages to combine historical accounts with battle descriptions, excessive references to Ernest Hemingway, and even a Grimm Brothers fairy tale.) It shouldn't be confused with purist military history (the "footnotes" which appear at the conclusion of each chapter are anecdotal in nature and not citations in the Turabian format.) The reader is asked to take as historical truth too many uncited references to alleged facts; for example, at one point the author, attempting to emphasize the success of the defense of the West Wall in delaying advancing Allied units, claims that Eisenhower not only would have welcomed a German attack into the Ardennes as a means of not having to deal with the West Wall, but that he knew it was coming. And this without the benefit of a footnote.

That observation having been made, Mr. Whiting has succeeded in putting a dog-tired GI face on this horrific battle, and I look forward to subsequent additions to this series. In sum, I recommend this book as an addition to a military historian's collection of WWII references as a human interest work, and not a citable reference work.

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The Eyes of Orion: Five Tank Lieutenants in the Persian Gulf War by Alex Vernon with Rob Holmes, Greg Downey, Neal Creighton and Dave Trybula; Foreword by Barry R. McCaffrey; Kent State University Press; 1999; 360 pages, hardcover; \$35.00.

Most officers eventually begin a professional library. It may start accidentally with random purchases at the Post Exchange or with

books left over from college. With time and experience, the choices become more refined. Certain books form the foundation of many of these professional libraries. *The Killer Angels*, *Platoon Leader*, *Company Commander* are early additions. Later, titles like *We Were Soldiers Once and Young...* and *Once an Eagle* are added and, in the case of the latter, read and reread. These thoughts come to mind when one reads the recently published, *The Eyes of Orion: Five Tank Lieutenants in the Persian Gulf War*. Not only is it a fine personal memoir, but it is as worthy an addition to a professional library as the titles listed above.

Eyes of Orion recounts the experiences of five armor lieutenants serving in the 24th Infantry Division (M) during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. The book is a blending of their experiences leading armor and scout platoons in the same brigade. From pre-deployment to post war and post army, the fears, frustrations and very candid observations of these five young officers are told in a style that is both easy to read and insightful.

What makes *Eyes of Orion* so valuable is that it captures the experience of youth at war. Written less than a decade after the war, while the authors were still young, their work is a valuable insight into the most destructive of youthful experiences: combat.

Perspective is an important element in a memoir, and certainly in a war memoir. Desert Storm lacked the carnage and high casualties of other wars. However, the perspective on the ground in Desert Storm, like in any other conflict, was radically different from those of the home front or of hindsight. The five platoon leaders of *Eyes of Orion* did not know at the time that their war would end with little bloodshed. They expected the worst. This expectation permeates the book and makes it stand out from previous Gulf War books that dealt with the larger picture.

This narrow view makes the *Eyes of Orion* a valuable contribution to the history of the Gulf War and to one's professional library. After reading this book, one can better understand the experiences of a young, untested leader, as he trains, deploys with, and ultimately leads into battle equally untested soldiers. The authors make plain how the hopes, fears, and survival of the soldiers rested upon their actions and how they each met this responsibility.

The five authors were obviously good at their jobs: dedicated, professional, earnest, and eager. However, *Eyes of Orion* is not an exercise in self-adulation or a retelling of "war stories" of questionable veracity. The authors give praise where it is due. The soldiers, NCOs, senior leaders, equipment, and the Army in general all receive much deserved praise. Equally, their criticism is often scathing for those who do fail in their duties. However, as in any honest accounting, the authors often save the harshest analysis for themselves. One of the authors, Alex Vernon, portrays himself as ultimately being unfit to serve as an officer. The accuracy of this depiction would be a good topic for an OPD session. With the

quote from General Stilwell at the beginning of *Once an Eagle* in mind, if an officer doubts his abilities, is he then automatically unfit to lead soldiers? With Vernon, this does not seem to be accurate. His self-doubts seemed more the natural response of a young man facing one of life's most daunting responsibilities: leading soldiers into battle. Whether this is an instance of excessive criticism or a matter of competence is for the reader to ponder.

Officer retention is another topic, relevant to today's Army, that is featured in *Eyes of Orion*. Four of the five authors have left the Army, some very soon after the war. In their descriptions of how and why they left the Army, one detects a glimmer of regret and self-justification. They expressed regret in leaving the institution that gave their lives meaning and the formative experience of their lifetime. In defending their decisions to leave, the authors seem to need to justify, to themselves as much as to others, why they left. The Army, like the war, was part of their youth. They grew because of their experience and in doing so outgrew the youthful reasons for serving.

This is a valuable perspective for those still serving. Read these accounts to understand better the reality, good and bad, of leaving the service. Life will change in ways unforeseen. The intangibles offered by military service are not always readily noticed. Being in corporate middle management, or attending grad school, as some of the authors did, is not the same as serving as an Army officer. Knowing this is useful before one actually hangs up his green suit.

Eyes of Orion is a valuable addition to a professional's bookshelf. Like the classic *We Were Soldiers Once and Young...*, *The Eyes of Orion* immerses the reader in the life of a unit as it trains, deploys, and ultimately fights. Armor lieutenants would do well to read this outstanding book and learn from their predecessors.

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Frontier Cavalryman: Lieutenant John Bigelow with the Buffalo Soldiers in Texas by BG (Ret.) Marcus E. Kinevan, Texas Western Press, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas; 1998; 338 pages, maps, pictures, sketches, appendices, endnotes, bibliography, index; \$25.00, hardback.

Frontier Cavalryman is a first-rate account of a young cavalry officer's experiences at the turn of the century in the 10th U.S. Cavalry. Brigadier General (Ret.) Marcus Kinevan delivers a well-documented and thorough history of the Army and the U.S. Cavalry of the late nineteenth century.

Kinevan's work is centered on Lieutenant John Bigelow's personal journal, which chronicles his experiences, observations, opinions and tribulations as a young cavalry officer in Texas. Bigelow and so many of his other

West Point classmates of the class of 1877 were assigned to black regiments and posted to the frontier, where they lived, worked, trained, scouted and fought against Indians and other marauders of the then-untamed and not so glorious West. Kinevan captures a basic body of history and experience, from the education of a young officer through his trials, tribulations, and ever-broadening awareness as an Army officer stationed in Texas. Bigelow is challenged by the demands of the Indian Wars, leading and training black soldiers and living in a very Victorian society. Although this book is set over 120 years ago, Bigelow's thoughts, opinions and basic experiences parallel those of many junior leaders throughout history.

Frontier Cavalryman is a comprehensive look at the Army of the 1870s. It reveals the unpopular and demanding operations that took place in Texas during this period, while providing a glimpse of the genesis of desegregation and equity for all races in the Army and American society as a whole. In the 10th U.S. Cavalry, the Buffalo Soldiers lived, worked and fought side by side. Through their efforts, hardships, and customs, many military and cultural changes were brought about on a wider scale throughout the United States.

Kinevan is brilliant in his portrayal of Lieutenant Bigelow's experiences, but misses with his overindulgence in exploring the Victorian culture of that era. These digressions provide a glimpse into the society of the time, focusing on the Army, Texas, and the city of San Antonio. Kinevan spends perhaps too much time discussing Bigelow's relationships with girls and their parents, and with walking around San Antonio. Perhaps his purpose is to provide a sense of the boredom that made up a great deal of Bigelow's life as a young officer in Texas. A further exploration of other issues, such as training, actual operations against the Indians, or the relationships among the soldiers of the 10th U.S. Cavalry, might have better served his wider purpose.

Frontier Cavalryman is exhaustively researched and documented by the author. He provides an excellent set of appendices that further detail the Army of this era. The endnotes and bibliography are well laid out and extensive. *Frontier Cavalryman* contains only a limited number of maps, photos, and drawings. This does not distract from the work, as there are photos of Bigelow, his soldiers, fellow officers and the locations where he lived, worked, and fought.

Bigelow's epitaph for a colleague perhaps best illustrates the principal feeling and message of this book: "Long and faithful performance of duty, sometimes arduous and dangerous, generally monotonous, and rarely, if ever, glorious or thrilling, has become a common thing in the traditions of the Army." Their efforts have led to the society and Army that we know today. *Frontier Cavalryman* is a worthy addition to any professional's library.

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